



PlantNetwork
Connecting gardens, sharing skills

PlantNetwork COVID-19 Meeting Wednesday 1st April 2020, 14:00-15:00

Summary of Discussion

This informal, online meeting, part of the PlantNetwork “Lockdown” Webinar Series, featured two introductory speakers, Simon Toomer (National Trust and Chair of PlantNetwork) and Doug Stewart (Waring Stewart Associates and PlantNetwork Member).

Doug highlighted a number of key points that he has been addressing for clients across the horticultural sector:

- If you have been furloughed, you cannot work. It is possible that your employers/organisation will be audited to check that staff are indeed furloughed so it is important to ensure that no work takes place from furloughed individuals. There is one exception to this: furloughed company directors are still permitted to work.
- If furloughed, any annual leave booked for this period can be deferred for up to two years.
- Volunteers are a key part of any garden and must not be forgotten. It is important that all volunteers are kept informed of developments with the garden/organisation and it is clear what they can do to help. Regular updates will maintain volunteer engagement.
- Working practices at the moment are very variable and reflect the different structures/roles of horticultural organisations. Examples include rotas of small teams maintaining social distancing – team size largely dependent on this need for distance and availability of equipment/tools rather than the duties described as essential; increased use of Zoom and other media platforms to maintain contact with staff/daily updates; only going on site if deemed safe to do so (role of risk assessments); use of paper rather than touchscreens to reduce possibility of transmission (paper can be disposed of).
- Cash grants, resilience grants and business rate holidays are some of the services available to a range of businesses. See: [COVID-19: support for businesses](#) from the government website and the [FSB website](#) which features regularly updated information and resources for anyone who is self-employed and for small businesses.
- To support the proposed plant scrappage scheme (in response to many growers asking for assistance as many of their plants become unsaleable), see details in the appendix.

Simon provided a perspective from the National Trust, describing how in less than a fortnight the organisation has gone from trying to keep all gardens/estates open to developing emergency plans for essential maintenance in the gardens as well as potential staff furloughs.



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- Horticultural activities have been designated as essential (security, watering particularly of protected environments, and pest control), prudent (activities needed to prevent deterioration of the garden such as mowing in key areas) and delayed (actions and activities that will need to wait until restrictions are less severe e.g. many activities requiring two people to assist in close proximity).
- Different gardens within the Trust have instigated different approaches and there is currently work ongoing to make these plans more consistent. A similar approach would be useful across the sector, whilst considering the different context of gardens.
- The lockdown is unlikely to be simply lifted and is likely to be a gradual transition, with more activities becoming possible and gardens beginning to open at different times. [Doug noted that garden centres and nurseries are likely to be some of the first retail establishments to open due to largely open-air structures; similarly, gardens would be expected to open before cinemas and theatres.]
- It is important to emphasise that furloughing is not a reflection of the importance of a person's role within an organisation but rather a response to support activities of immediate concern. The aim is to prevent significant financial loss during a very difficult time and so enable future employment.
- Many organisations are committing to making up the remaining 20% of furloughed workers salaries – but not all. Furloughing also allows staff to concentrate on other issues such as care of children or other family members.

General discussion during the meeting identified a number of factors/issues:

- The most immediate concern is staff safety.
- Many gardens/organisations trying to support suppliers/local communities by, for example, delaying rather than cancelling plant orders (willingness to take larger plants at a later date), support of growers lobbying re: plant loss reimbursement, donating produce to local food banks etc.
- Some gardens have not broached the topic of furloughing with staff and others are expecting staff to continue working as normal (with social distancing and new hygiene aspects implemented). Many staff are keen to keep working and to contribute to the maintenance of the garden. The importance of 'sanctuary' for staff was mentioned as a reason to keep working.
- Some organisations have already furloughed staff and others are likely to do so this week. It is important to not consider furloughing as something shameful – it is a matter of survival.
- Volunteers have felt the loss of working in gardens enormously – particularly as many will fall in the vulnerable group and will be confined to their homes. Some are still being allowed to work in gardens.



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- Staff are also at risk of health (mental and physical) during this time and need to be supported regardless of whether furloughed, working at home or in the garden but working alone.
- Still much confusion on what can and cannot do, especially in smaller businesses/concerns.

A number of participants volunteered the processes and practices they are implementing in their gardens including:

- Staff rotas: staff assigned to a number of teams which come in at different times to carry out essential jobs (usually watering). Staff frequently volunteering for roles/places in teams.
- Many are evaluating the possibility of introducing other activities as the new working practices become more familiar – such as mowing and other ‘prudent activities’. The main concerns to be overcome are the need to prevent sharing of equipment (although through cleaning seen as largely acceptable) and the need for social distancing (especially if limited communal spaces such as canteens/mess rooms, toilets etc.). Staff might be encouraged to bring in packed lunches and drinks in flasks to try and reduce need for access to communal areas during breaks. Thorough cleaning is still required after any use.

Appendix

To offer support for the plant production industry, who are looking for a government funded plant scrappage scheme, the industry want to write an open letter to Government setting out the urgent need for financial support. Simply drop an email to Boyd Douglas-Davies - bdd@britishgardencentres.com

Subject Support for plant producers

With the name of your organisation and 'Yes' in the subject